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WORK AND INTERESTS OF THE BUREAU OF AGRICULTURAL CHEMISTRY AND ENGINEERING IN RURAL HOUSING

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A Paper prepared by Wallace Ashby, for the Rural Housing Get-together of the Central Housing Committee on Rural Housing, August 5, 1940.

The Bureau of Agricultural Chemistry and Engineering is the principal contact of the U. S. Department of Agriculture with the Departments of Agricultural Engineering and the Extension engineers of the State Agricultural Colleges which are the State agencies most directly in touch with the housing problems of farmers. These departments are continually called upon for assistance in planning and advice in construction and maintenance of farmhouses and other farm buildings as well as recommendations for safe and adequate water supply, sanitary disposal of waste, and suitable facilities for heating, ventilating and lighting farmhouses and other structures. The work of this Bureau dealing with rural housing has largely grown up in answer to the demands of the State Agricultural Colleges and individual farmers for aid in solving their problems more satisfactorily.

The housing activities of the Bureau are part of its work in the broader field of farm structures and include (1) research, and (2) the dissemination of information intended to assist farmers with their home building problems, either directly or through the State extension agencies.

The object of research is to develop improved types of farmhouses that are economical to construct and maintain, comfortable to live in, and which adequately provide for the varied activities carried on in farm homes. Studies are conducted of materials, methods of construction, and equipment adaptable to farm use. Native and other materials which can be processed and handled satisfactorily by farmers and other unskilled

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and semi-skilled rural labor are of particular interest.

Two active projects are being conducted to find the relation of construction types to winter and summer comfort, one in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin and the other with the University of Georgia. The work in Wisconsin is carried on in occupied farm homes, while that in Georgia is mostly in experimental houses built for the purpose. Heating equipment and economical methods of summer cooling are included in these investigations. Another type of investigation which is under way in the Wisconsin project is the study of house planning as related to various household and farm tasks.

The Bureau has issued many bulletins, circulars and leaflets on farmhouse planning, selection and use of materials, and selection and installation of equipment for farmhouses. Some of these publications present the results of investigations; others give instructions regarding good building practices that can be easily applied in farm construction. In addition it is necessary to answer about 4,000 letters a year in reply to questions that are not directly answered by the bulletins.

Regional plan catalogs of farmhouses and of other farm structures and equipment have been prepared by the Bureau in cooperation with the State agricultural colleges of the Northeastern, the Western and Southern regions. These catalogs serve to coordinate the work of preparing farm building plans, to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort, and to make available in other parts of the country the best plans developed by the various State agricultural colleges and Governmental agencies. The catalogs are furnished to extension workers in each county through Department channels and are available to the public at low cost from the

Government Printing Office. The Midwestern States have published their own catalog. Working drawings for the plans may be obtained from the State colleges in each region at nominal cost.

Through its own studies of farmhousing and its contacts with the State Agricultural Colleges, the Bureau has become acutely aware of the serious problem presented by the continued decline in the condition of farmhouses and other farm buildings. This situation is the more regrettable because over much of the United States for the past few years home labor has been available for making needed improvements, and native lumber, stone or other materials suitable for construction are found on the farm or may be obtained locally at relatively low cost. Because of the immense volume of repairs, remodeling and new building needed on farms it is doubtful if any program of subsidized construction can bear the cost of rehabilitation. If possible, a way should be found to stimulate the active interest and participation of farm people in making their own improvements. To do this they need (1) assistance in planning, (2) direction in use of their own labor, (3) funds for hire of some skilled labor and for purchase of some materials.

The experience of the Bureau of Agricultural Chemistry and Engineering in providing technical assistance and observing the possibilities for economical self-help, should be of value in working out a program along these lines.